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ABSTRACT

The National Institute on Educational Governance, Finance, Policymaking, and Management (part of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement) helps state and local policymakers and educators use knowledge from research to govern, fund, lead, and manage elementary and secondary schools. This document summarizes what policymakers have said are the most critical issues and research needs facing them. It is based on the views of policymakers and leaders as expressed at a planning forum sponsored by the Institute and in papers commissioned for that forum. The first section examines some critical issues for future research, grouped by the following major themes: issues related to the inputs and outcomes of education; issues related to the structure and process of education; issues related to the core of teaching and learning; and issues related to the broader context of education. The next section summarizes policymakers' ideas about how to effectively present and disseminate research information to a policy audience. The final section discusses strategies for encouraging ongoing dialogue between policymakers and researchers. (LMI)

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Meeting the Information Needs of Education Policymakers

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The National Institute on Educational Governance, Finance, Policymaking, and Management
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
U.S. Department of Education

Meeting the Information Needs of Education Policymakers

The National Institute on Educational Governance, Finance, Policymaking, and Management

U.S. Department of Education
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Preface

The National Institute on Educational Governance, Finance, Policymaking, and Management is part of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in the U.S. Department of Education. The Institute was created by the Education Research, Development, Dissemination, and Improvement Act of 1994. The Institute's mission is to provide leadership and support for research and development examining the critical governance, finance, policy making and management aspects of teaching and learning. The purpose of the work is to identify research with short-term and long-term consequences for policymakers and educators and to disseminate findings from such work in the most useful ways to help them design, implement, and sustain effective education reforms.

Toward that end, the Institute is committed to targeting its program of research toward helping address the emerging and enduring issues being faced by the Institute's clients—America's education policymakers, practitioners, and other education leaders. In order to constructively influence policy and management decisions, information and products based on research must target the right audience, in the most useful form, at the right time.

This document summarizes the direction that our clients have provided the Institute. It draws heavily from a meeting held with a range of policymakers, practitioners and other educations leaders, including state legislators and legislative staff, representatives of the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Governors' Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, state and local superintendents, representatives of the business community, school board members, education administrator associations, and teacher associations.[1]

We wish to thank those many individuals who have given so generously of their time and their counsel to help shape the direction and nature of our Institute's work.

Deborah Inman
Director
National Institute on Educational Governance, Finance, Policymaking, and Management

[1]Participants in this meeting are listed in the appendix of this document.

Executive Summary

State and local policymakers and education leaders make complex decisions that affect billions of public dollars and millions of school children. Policymakers today want high-quality, objective research to help guide their decisions.

Policymakers and leaders have identified the following four broad areas where they felt additional research would be beneficial; within each area, they cited several key research questions.

I. Issues related to the inputs and outcomes of education.

- What are some innovative models for financing public education?
- What is the relationship between education funding and student performance? Which investments and reform strategies have the greatest impact on learning, and what are their comparative costs?
- What does research say about designing and implementing new assessment systems tied to standards?
- Which kinds of incentives, sanctions, or other consequences are most effective in motivating students, teachers, and administrators to perform at their best?
- What are some appropriate forms of state intervention or takeovers of local school systems that have failed to make progress?

II. Issues related to the structure and process of education.

- How can states increase local flexibility while continuing to exercise meaningful accountability for educational quality and equity?
- How can states monitor operations and measure quality of charter schools and choice schools?

- How can policies be instructive to the individuals who must carry them out? How can examples of good practice be infused into state and local policies?

- How can states and school districts translate the rhetoric of standards into policies that lead to genuine changes in teaching and learning? Which state and local policies can help build district and school capacity to implement standards-based reform?

III. Issues related to the core of teaching and learning.

- What can states and school districts do to better prepare and maintain a high-quality teaching force?

- Which kinds of professional development do teachers need to implement standards-based reform, teach diverse students to high standards, and apply new technology in their classrooms?

IV. Issues related to the broader context of education.

- How can policymakers build public consensus for long-term reforms that may entail difficult or uncomfortable changes?

- Which specific policies can decisionmakers adopt that can help build public confidence in public education?

- What are the governance, finance, and management implications of the demographic changes shaping education?

- How can education agencies develop more effective partnerships with public, private, and community entities to address the range of human service needs?

- What is the impact of welfare reform on schools and preschools? On demands for social services?

Introduction

The National Institute on Educational Governance, Finance, Policymaking, and Management helps state and local policymakers and educators use knowledge from research to govern, fund, lead, and manage elementary and secondary schools. Policymakers and education leaders—including governors, state legislators, chief state school officers, school board members, local superintendents, principals and teacher leaders—are key consumers of research information. They make complex, far-reaching decisions about how to spend billions of public dollars. They establish the conditions and requirements that govern public education for millions of children across districts or states. They have primary responsibility for implementing education laws and charting a course for their education agencies. They must struggle with features of the legislative process that frequently work against systemic policies and long-term planning. They must balance a host of political and community pressures while trying to keep the focus on quality teaching and learning. To carry out these duties, policymakers and education leaders need high-quality, objective research information, written in language they can understand and delivered in time to inform their decisions.

This document summarizes what thoughtful policymakers have said are the most critical issues and research needs facing them. It is based on the views of policymakers and leaders themselves as expressed at a planning forum sponsored by the Institute and in papers commissioned for that forum. Their views about research agendas, topics, and formats provide a foundation for a program of education research and development that will be both useful and timely. The first section of this document identifies and examines some critical issues for future research, grouped by the following major themes:

- **Issues related to the inputs and outcomes of education,** including issues of financing education, getting the best return on educational investments, and instilling meaningful accountability.

- **Issues related to the structure and process of education,** including issues of revising governance arrangements and connecting governance and policy with changes in classrooms.

- **Issues related to the core of teaching and learning,** including issues of preparing teachers to implement reform.

- **Issues related to the broader context of education,** including issues of building public support for education and addressing demographic and social factors that affect education.

A subsequent section of the document summarizes policymakers' ideas about how to effectively present and disseminate research information to a policy audience. A final section discusses strategies for encouraging ongoing dialogue between policymakers and researchers.

Critical Issues for a National Research Agenda

The nation is in the midst of a dynamic period of school reform. Policymakers and leaders are facing complicated questions about educational governance, finance, policymaking, and management. Research-based information can help policymakers reach well-informed decisions on these critical questions.

Before identifying specific research issues in these four areas, policymakers have offered three general observations that can help researchers frame their agenda. First, it is useful to recognize that governance, finance, policymaking, and management are not ends in themselves. Rather they are the means for accomplishing the primary goal of education—improving student achievement. Second, these four areas of research are closely intertwined and often benefit from systemic rather than separate strategies. Third, although traditional models still dominate educational governance, finance, and management, many policymakers hunger for fresh ideas and are looking to research to provide examples of intelligent innovation. Policymakers today are saying, "help us invent what we need, not fix what we've got."

Research can help policymakers invent what they need—but only if their research is focused on the right questions and conducted in a useful way. Based on their own experience with pressing or unresolved issues in their states and school districts, policymakers and leaders have identified several high-priority research issues and questions in the areas of finance, governance, policymaking, and management. These issues can be grouped into four broad themes: inputs and outcomes, structure and process, core teaching and learning, and the context of education.

I. Inputs and Outcomes of Education

All decisionmakers share concerns about financing education and the use of education resources (inputs) and justifying these expenditures with demonstrated returns on investments (outcomes). In keeping with a shifting emphasis from the input side of the ledger to the outcome side, policymakers are attempting to design

meaningful accountability systems that encourage positive changes in education and provide useful, credible information about student learning.

A. Financing Education

Education finance is the foundation that enables schools to exist and teaching and learning to occur. Although states provide a major share of education funding, some states still lack a coherent direction or philosophy in their school finance systems. Other states are looking to replace outmoded finance systems with alternatives that reward performance, improve equalization, or tap nontraditional sources of funding. Local districts continue to be concerned about the adequacy, equity, and stability of school funding.

As they redesign their finance systems, policymakers and leaders would like answers to the following questions:

- What are useful innovative models for financing public education? How can states and local school districts provide adequate, stable funding? Are there good finance models that would lessen local dependence on a limited local tax base?
- How can school finance systems be linked to performance?
- How can states finance the costs of designing and implementing new assessment systems?
- How can states and local districts keep up with the demands for facilities created by rising enrollments? How can they finance repairs and renovations of aging infrastructure?
- How can states and districts finance equitable access to technology?
- What is the impact of special education costs on general education budgets?

B. Getting the Best Return on Educational Investments

In an era of limited resources and wavering citizen confidence in public education, policymakers and taxpayers are asking to see demonstrable returns on their education investments. They want assurances that schools are using resources efficiently to increase student achievement.

Consequently, both policymakers and education leaders want sound information that will help them "budget for results." They want data that they can use to compare the quality and cost effectiveness of various programs and expenditures. A related need is for research that synthesizes knowledge about "what works" in different kinds of districts, schools, and classrooms. Teachers and administrators, as well as policymakers, can benefit from this type of information.

Policymakers who are concerned about accountability would like to learn more about the following questions:

- What is the relationship between education funding and student performance? Which investments and reform strategies have the greatest impact on learning, and what are their comparative costs? How can school districts get the best results with limited funding?

- How do investments in technology affect children's learning? Which technology investments are most cost effective?

- Which governance, management, and instructional strategies work best in various circumstances? Which work best with at-risk children? In urban schools? In the lowest performing schools?

C. Meaningful Accountability

Greater attention to outcomes and higher standards for student learning require new ways of holding schools accountable for results. Policymakers and educators are grappling with how to design and implement accountability systems that are meaningful, fair, and cost effective. They face complex, politically charged decisions about how to measure and report the progress of schools with widely varying demographic profiles. They are also looking for accountability approaches that effectively motivate students and staff.

State and local policymakers and leaders would like answers to the following questions:

- What does research say about designing and implementing new assessment systems tied to standards? How can states and districts ensure that their assessment systems are reliable and fair?

- What are some good ways to measure student performance? How can student assessment results be reported accurately and fairly? How can states and school districts ensure that test data are used only in appropriate ways?

- Which kinds of indicators of school performance are most appropriate, fair, and understandable? How can accurate data on school progress be reported in ways that discourage unfair or misleading comparisons? To what extent should socioeconomic factors be considered and reported?

- Which kinds of incentives, sanctions, or other consequences are most effective in motivating students, teachers, and administrators to perform at their best?

- What are some appropriate forms of state intervention or takeovers of local school systems that fail to make progress? When should interventions take place? What are their effects? When are schools ready to resume control for themselves?

II. Structure and Process of Education

Many current school reform initiatives involve new ways of structuring and organizing education. Some reforms seek to revise the relationships among the various levels of government or between the public and private sectors. Many reforms also aim to restructure classroom processes or the roles of teachers and students.

A. Revising Governance Arrangements

With the movement toward standards-based reform, governance relationships are changing at the local, state, and federal levels. In adopting standards, many states have assumed more activist roles in curriculum content and assessment.

At the same time, however, the states and the federal government are decentralizing, deregulating, and giving local school districts greater flexibility, often in exchange for the promise of improved student outcomes. But despite some increased flexibility, local school leaders still express frustration with the cumulative effect of certain state and federal mandates.

Policymakers and educators are also seriously debating more profound governance changes, including charter schools, vouchers, and other public or private choice options. Legislators and school leaders on different sides of these issues have a common interest in research about the impact of alternative governance structures, and policy options for designing, monitoring, and evaluating them.

As they debate governance changes, policymakers are asking for more information about the following questions:

- What are the consequences of changing responsibilities among local, state, and federal governments? How can states increase local flexibility while continuing to exercise meaningful oversight over educational quality and equity? Which state and federal requirements can be relaxed or waived, and which should be continued? Does more local control produce better results?

- How can policymakers more effectively coordinate local, state, and federal funding streams?

- How can states bring greater coherence to state-level governance systems?

- How can states monitor the operations and measure the quality of charter schools and choice schools? Do vouchers and other choice options improve student achievement? How cost effective are various choice models? How do choice programs affect the quality, governance, demographics, and funding of public schools?

- Which other nontraditional governance and school organization models hold promise for improving public education?

B. Connecting Governance and Policy with Classroom Change

Increasing student achievement ultimately depends on changing classroom processes. Legislators wonder whether their policy decisions are really changing teaching and learning or whether their influence stops at the classroom door.

The issue of bridging the gap between policy and practice has taken on greater importance with the enactment of standards-based reform. The adoption of reforms often creates expectations that changes will occur in teaching and learning, and many policymakers are closely watching what happens in classrooms. They want feedback on the impact of newly implemented reform initiatives. At the same time, as educators are well aware, policy directives that are too prescriptive about instructional practices can be counterproductive.

The following questions are on the minds of policymakers and education leaders as they try to connect policy with practice:

- How can states and school districts translate the rhetoric of standards into policies that lead to genuine changes in teaching and learning? How can reforms be designed to have the maximum impact on learning outcomes? What are the impacts of standards-based reforms on district and school organizational structures, governance, and management? Which state and local policies can help build district and school capacity to implement standards-based reform?

- How can state and local decisionmakers use research findings about standards-based teaching and learning to design better policies? Which kinds of funding, governance, and management policies encourage effective classroom practices and higher student and teacher performance?

- How can policies be instructive to the individuals who must carry them out? How specific should policies be to signal their intentions without squelching motivation? How can examples of good practice be infused into state and local policies? How much time should be built in for adults to learn how to implement new policies?

- Which policies are best carried out in combination with each other? Which types of policy alignment are most critical?

- How can reforms be designed so they endure through leadership changes and other shifting circumstances?

III. The Core of Teaching and Learning

Improving instruction is the ultimate purpose of school reform. Teachers remain central to improving instruction. Therefore, ambitious reform agendas are unlikely to succeed unless they include strategies for providing professional development to current teachers and improving the preparation of prospective teachers.

Preparing Teachers to Implement Reform

Policymakers and education leaders are looking for effective ways to attract and retain the best new teachers, to help teachers implement standards-based reform, and to make coherent reforms in the whole enterprise of teacher preparation and professional development.

State and local legislators and leaders would like to know which policies can help provide positive answers to the following questions:

- How can policymakers evaluate teacher quality? What can states and school districts do to better prepare and maintain a high-quality teaching force?

- Which kinds of professional development do teachers need to implement standards-based reform, teach diverse students to high standards, and apply new technology in their classrooms?

- Which factors are most essential to effective teacher preparation and professional development?

IV. The Broader Context of Education

Decisionmakers realize that they cannot make major changes in finance, governance, teacher preparation, or other vital areas without strong support from the citizenry. There is an emerging consensus that "school reform must be a community-wide enterprise, carried out through partnerships with parents, business, social service agencies, and other community institutions." These relationships with the broader community context are particularly important at a time when the demographics of the student populations are changing and myriad social factors are affecting the well-being of children and families.

A. Building Public Support for Education

Restoring public confidence in public education is a major challenge in an era when a minority of the voting public has children in school and more parents are looking to private schools and choice alternatives for quality education. Policymakers and educators realize that to restore citizen confidence, they must make significant improvements in public education.

Improving education presents its own set of public challenges. Although many citizens support education reform in general, they may disagree on the specifics or may be unprepared to accept the costs, discomfort, and timelines required to make significant changes. Yet ambitious reforms cannot succeed without adequate funding and public support.

Decisionmakers want information to help them answer the following questions:

- How can policymakers develop reform agendas that are acceptable to a majority of citizens (and to a majority of their colleagues) without reducing their proposals to the lowest common denominator? How can they build public

consensus for long-term reforms that may entail difficult or uncomfortable changes?

- Which specific policies can decisionmakers adopt that can help build public confidence in public education? How can educators and policymakers use reform policies to generate stronger support for education funding among the electorate?

- Which policies are most effective in strengthening relationships between schools and parents and showing more responsiveness to parent concerns?

B. Addressing Demographic and Social Factors

Demographic and social changes are creating new governance, finance, and management challenges for education. First, schools are serving more diverse students than ever before, including children with limited English proficiency and children from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Different kinds of children may require different methods of instruction to achieve at high levels.

Second, social problems, such as poverty, drugs, and crime, are affecting children's health, safety, and readiness to learn and are creating new demands for human services—demands that could increase with implementation of welfare reform. Already schools are asked to do many things that divert energy and funding away from their main mission of teaching children. Legislators and education leaders would like ideas about how to handle the array of social problems that affect education.

Finally, policymakers and educators would like information about how to link K–12 education with learning before kindergarten and after high school. The increasing numbers of children with working parents—as well as the growing body of research about the importance of child development—have heightened demands for quality early childhood services. And concerns among the business community about inadequately prepared high school graduates are causing educators and policymakers to rethink their school-to-work transition strategies.

Several questions about social and demographic issues are percolating in the minds of policymakers and leaders:

- What are the governance, finance, and management implications of the demographic changes shaping education? Which strategies are most effective in helping children from diverse backgrounds achieve at high levels?

- How can education agencies develop more effective partnerships with public, private, and community entities to address the range of human service needs? Which are the best strategies for improving school safety and discipline?

- What is the impact of welfare reform on schools and preschools? On demands for social services? On funding for education? Does education have a role in implementing welfare reform?

- How can states and school districts meet rising demands for quality early childhood programs? Which approaches are most effective in improving the cognitive development of young children?

- What are some strategies for improving transitions from school to work? What can schools learn from the private sector about effective workforce preparation?

Targeting Research Information to a Policy Audience

Policymakers and education leaders operate in unique environments and their information needs are somewhat different from those of the broader education or research communities. Research entities must recognize and be responsive to these special needs. In order to influence policy and management decisions, research information and products must target the right audience, in the most useful form, at the right time.

Research Needs of Policymakers and Education Leaders

Policymakers take decisive actions and frame most issues in terms of up or down votes. This means that legislators have limited use for research information that is overly detailed, avoids any definitive conclusions, or is too late to be helpful.

Policymakers, especially part-time state legislators, must deal with a wide range of issues in a relatively short time. Usually they cannot afford to wait several years for a final study report; they need whatever good information is available now to inform their policy decisions. If they lack hard data, they may feel pressure to act anyway, and may base their decisions on anecdotal information or public opinion. The adoption of term limits in many states has heightened the need for timely information; there is more turnover in state capitals, and legislators have less time to learn the ropes before achieving influential positions. At the same time, no one is well served by premature information that is inaccurate or has other serious data problems. Therefore, research entities often face the dilemma of balancing timeliness and quality.

State and local superintendents, as chief executives of large organizations, share concerns about timeliness similar to those of policymakers. Local leaders, like state legislators, must sift through an overwhelming amount of information in their jobs. Thus, the form in which research is presented—brief and clear—is as important as its timing.

Ultimately the credibility of research information to both policymakers and educators depends on its accuracy and objectivity. Reliable, nonpartisan information can help build consensus among people with different political views and can advance national, state, and local policy.

Suggestions for Targeting Information

Policymakers and education leaders have made the following suggestions for improving the timeliness, format, dissemination, and objectivity of research information aimed at a policy audience.

A. Timeliness of Information

- Research entities should consider the time constraints of policymakers when they plan, collect, and release research information.
- To address the needs of a policy audience for quick turnaround, research entities could develop short-term research projects (e.g. a six-month time frame) or produce quick syntheses of existing research data on urgent issues.
- Researchers could disseminate data at various stages of the research process, or in forms that are less than final but still reasonably accurate.

B. Format of Information

- Information aimed at a policy audience should be succinctly and clearly written, in language that policymakers, parents, and other laypersons can understand, with clear charts and graphs.
- Policymakers and executives prefer brief summaries to long reports.
- Policymakers like to see research studies that present some options for action.
- Research for a policy audience should not be presented in too scholarly a way, with too many qualifiers and equivocations.

C. Dissemination of Information

- Research entities could disseminate information through means other than traditional research reports, such as databases on the Internet, "books on tape" that busy professionals can listen to in transit, or short policy briefs on critical issues.

D. Objectivity of Information

- Research entities should ensure that their information is objective, accurate, and fairly reported.

- Research aimed at policymakers and practitioners should have a clear, direct message that will counteract the misinformation, pseudo-research, anecdotes, and myths that sometimes characterize debates about education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current wave of school reform is unlikely to bear fruit without a continuous infusion of new ideas and progress reports from research studies. Policymakers and education leaders can use research information to guide their decisions about new reforms, monitor the effects of current initiatives, and abolish effective programs. In order to be effective, research on governance, finance, policymaking and management must address the issues and questions that decisionmakers really care about. These include issues related to the inputs and outcomes of education, the structure and process of education, the core of teaching and learning, and the broader context in which education operates.

Information must be presented at the right time and in the right form to influence a policy audience. Regular exchanges between the Institute and its clients will improve dissemination and use of research data in the policy and leadership communities. The Institute invites continued dialogue and additional ideas from state and local policymakers, educators, and other key clients.

Appendix: Planning Forum Participants

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